CHAPTER 7

Trinity

For many people, the doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most baffling areas of Christian theology. How can we think of God as "three persons"? There are many who suspect that this is simply an attempt by theologians to make their subject inaccessible to outsiders. Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), third president of the United States of America, was severely critical of what he termed the "incomprehensible jargon of the Trinitarian arithmetic." Why on earth do we need to speak of God in this convoluted and puzzling way? Might it suggest that theology is thoroughly irrational?

More recently, Christians have become aware of the Islamic critique of the doctrine, which holds that it compromises the unity of God. Many Christians neglected the notion, partly because it was seen as obscure. Karl Rahner remarked that modern Christians were "almost mere monotheists," paying lip service to the Trinity in theory, but ignoring it in practice. "We must be willing to admit," he remarked, "that, should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged."

Yet despite these difficulties, there has been a massive revival of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity in Christian theology in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The foundations of this revival of interest were laid by Karl Barth and others in the period before the Second World War. Since then, there has been a remarkable surge of interest in developing Trinitarian approaches across the life and thought of the church. Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox alike have been involved in the exploration of the Trinitarian geography of faith.

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The importance of this development was emphasized by the British theologian Colin Gunton (1941–2003), one of the most important recent advocates of the "promise of trinitarian theology":

> Because God is triune, we must respond to him in a particular way, or rather set of ways, corresponding to the richness of his being ... In turn, that means that everything looks – and, indeed, is – different in the life of the Trinity.

In this chapter, we shall consider some of the leading themes of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, beginning with some of its conceptual foundations.

Belief in the Trinity

Why do Christians believe in the Trinity? Surely a simpler way of thinking and speaking about God would make things a lot easier? The best way of understanding the basis of this seemingly baffling doctrine is to consider it as being the inevitable and legitimate way of thinking about God which emerges from a sustained engagement with the biblical witness to the words and works of God. The doctrine of the Trinity can be regarded as the outcome of a process of sustained and critical reflection on the pattern of divine activity revealed in scripture, and continued in Christian experience. This is not to say that scripture contains or sets out an explicit doctrine of the Trinity; rather, scripture bears witness to a God who demands to be understood in a Trinitarian manner.

At first sight, there are only two biblical verses which are open to a Trinitarian interpretation: Matthew 28:19 and 2 Corinthians 13:14. The first commands the disciples to baptize people "in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit"; the second speaks of the Father, Son, and Spirit in the familiar words of "the grace." Both these verses have become deeply rooted in the Christian consciousness, the former on account of its baptismal associations, and the latter through the common use of the formula in Christian prayer and devotion. Yet these two verses, taken together or in isolation, can hardly be thought of as constituting a doctrine of the Trinity.

The ultimate grounds of the doctrine of the Trinity do not lie in the two verses noted above. Rather, the foundations of the doctrine are to be found in the pattern of divine activity to which the New Testament bears witness. The Father is revealed in Christ through the Spirit. There is the closest of connections between the Father, Son, and Spirit in the New Testament writings. Time after time, New Testament passages link together these three elements as part of a greater whole. The totality of God's saving presence and power can only, it would seem, be expressed by involving all three elements (for example, see 1 Corinthians 12:4–6; 2 Corinthians 1:21–22; Galatians 4:6; Ephesians 2:20–22; 2 Thessalonians 2:13–14; Titus 3:4–6; 1 Peter 1:2).

The best way of beginning to think about the doctrine of the Trinity is to think of the Christian Bible as setting out the nature and actions of one God – the god that Christians refer to as the "God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." While insisting that there is only one God, Christianity affirms a rich, complex vision of God, which is extremely difficult to put into words. Down the ages, Christian theologians have realized that they have two basic options here. They could set out a very simple concept of God, which is easily grasped – but fails to do justice to the profound and multifaceted witness to God found in the Bible, and then in Christian worship and experience. Or they could do their best to remain faithful to this witness to God – even though the end result was difficult to understand. Orthodox Christian theology has always adopted the second of these two courses. A quotation from Augustine of Hippo is often noted here: "If you can fully grasp it, it's not God."

The starting point for Christian reflections on the Trinity is, as we have seen, the New Testament witness to the presence and activity of God in Christ and through the Spirit. For Irenaeus, the whole process of salvation, from its beginning to its end, bore witness to the action of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Irenaeus made use of a term which would feature prominently in future discussions of the Trinity: "the economy of salvation." The use of the term "economy" here needs a little explanation. The Greek word *oikonomia* basically means "the way in which one's affairs are ordered" (the relation to the modern sense of the word will thus be clear). For Irenaeus, the "economy of salvation" meant "the way in which God has ordered the salvation of humanity in history."

Figure 15 Andrei Rublev (1360–ca. 1430). *Icon with the Trinity*. Tretyakov State Gallery, Moscow. Photo Scala, Florence.

At the time, Irenaeus was under considerable pressure from Gnostic critics, who argued that the creator God was quite distinct from (and inferior to) the redeemer God (see chapter 3). Marcion of Sinope (ca. 110–60) argued that the Old Testament God was merely a creator God, and totally different from the redeemer God of the New Testament. As a result, the Old Testament should be shunned by Christians, who should concentrate their attention upon the New Testament. Irenaeus vigorously rejected this idea. He insisted that the entire process of salvation, from the first moment of creation to the last moment of history, was the work of the one and the same God. There was a single economy of salvation, in which the one God – who was both creator and redeemer – was at work to redeem the creation.

In his *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, Irenaeus insisted upon the distinct yet related roles of Father, Son, and Spirit within the economy of salvation. He affirmed his faith in:

> *God the Father uncreated*, who is uncontained, invisible, one God, creator of the universe; this is the first article of our faith . . . And the *Word of God*, the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, . . . who, in the fulness of time, in order to gather all things to himself, he became a human being amongst human beings, capable of being seen and touched, to destroy death, bring life, and restore fellowship between God and humanity. And the *Holy Spirit* . . . who, in the fulness of time, was poured out in a new way on our human nature in order to renew humanity throughout the entire world in the sight of God.

This passage brings out clearly the idea of the Godhead in which each person is responsible for an aspect of the economy of salvation. Far from being a rather pointless piece of theological speculation, the doctrine of the Trinity is grounded directly in the complex human experience of redemption in Christ, and is concerned with the explanation of this experience. This point has been made repeatedly by later theologians, who see it as the starting point for authentic Trinitarian theology. As the American theologian Catherine Mowry LaCugna (1952–97) put it, "the shape of trinitarian doctrine is dictated by the pattern of redemption; everything comes from God, is made known and redeemed through Jesus Christ, and is consummated by the power of the Holy Spirit."

Tertullian argued that God's action within the economy of salvation is complex, revealing both a *unity* and a *distinctiveness*. The doctrine of theTrinity thus affirms the unity of God, while recognizing the complexity and profundity of the Christian vision of God. Tertullian thus argues that *substance* is what unites the three aspects of the economy of salvation; *person* is what distinguishes them. The three persons of the Trinity are distinct, yet not divided (*distincti non divisi*), different yet not separate or independent of each other (*discreti non separati*). The complexity of the human experience of redemption is thus the result of the three persons of the Godhead acting in distinct yet coordinated manners in human history, without any loss of the total unity of the Godhead.

So what are the basic elements of the Christian vision of God that are formally set out in the doctrine of the Trinity? The three main elements are the following:

1. God created the world, establishing it with order and form.
2. God redeemed the world in Jesus Christ.
3. God is present in the world here and now, guiding and encouraging believers.

It is easy to set out a simple understanding of God which is able to incorporate one of these elements. For example, speaking of God as creator or lawgiver causes no fundamental intellectual problems. Yet this is only part of the Christian vision of God, which omits more than it affirms.

The doctrine of the Trinity weaves together the strands of the Christian understanding of God, giving a vision of God which is faithful to the Christian experience of that God, even though it poses an intellectual challenge. Omitting anything may make the doctrine easier to understand – but it is a distorted, inaccurate, and inadequate representation of God, which fails to do justice to the way that God actually is. In the end, the doctrine of the Trinity can be seen as an admission that human words are simply inadequate to express the glory and wonder of God. The English theologian Charles Gore (1853–1932) made this point as follows:

> Human language never can express adequately divine realities. A constant tendency to apologize for human speech, a great element of agnosticism, an awful sense of unfathomed depths beyond the little that is made known, is always present to the mind of theologians who know what they are about, in conceiving or expressing God. "We see," says St. Paul, "in a mirror, in terms of a riddle"; "we know in part." "We are compelled," complains St. Hilary [of Poitiers] "to attempt what is unattainable, to climb where we cannot reach, to speak what we cannot utter; instead of the mere adoration of faith, we are compelled to entrust the deep things of religion to the perils of human expression."

The second of the three elements we have just noticed has been of particular importance to the development of the doctrine of the Trinity.

It can be seen as being directly related to the evolution of Christology. The more emphatic the church became that Christ was God, the more it came under pressure to clarify how Christ related to God. The development of the doctrine of the Trinity took place in three stages, and was essentially complete by the end of the fourth century:

Stage 1: the recognition of the full divinity of Jesus Christ.
Stage 2: the recognition of the full divinity of the Spirit.
Stage 3: the definitive formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, embedding and clarifying these central insights, and determining their mutual relationship.

With the full recognition of the divinity of the Holy Spirit in the fourth century, the scene was set for the final development of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. This sequential development of the doctrine of the Trinity is acknowledged by Gregory of Nazianzus (329–89), who pointed to a gradual progress in clarification and understanding of the mystery of God's revelation in the course of time. It was, he argued, impossible to deal with the question of the divinity of the Spirit until the issue of the divinity of Christ had been settled.

> The Old Testament preached the Father openly and the Son more obscurely. The New Testament revealed the Son, and hinted at the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Now the Spirit dwells in us, and is revealed more clearly to us. It was not proper to preach the Son openly, while the divinity of the Father had not yet been admitted. Nor was it proper to accept the Holy Spirit before [the divinity of] the Son had been acknowledged... Instead, by gradual advances and... partial ascents, we should move forward and increase in clarity, so that the light of the Trinity should shine.

A Trinitarian heresy: modalism

The term "modalism" was introduced by the German historian of dogma, Adolf von Harnack, to describe the common element of a group of Trinitarian heresies, associated with Noetus and Praxeas in the late second century, and Sabellius in the third. Each of these writers was concerned to safeguard the unity of the Godhead,

fearing a lapse into some form of tritheism as a result of the doctrine of the Trinity.

This vigorous defense of the absolute unity of God (often referred to as "monarchianism," from the Greek word *monarchia*, meaning "a single principle of authority") led these writers to insist that the self-revelation of the one and only God took place in different ways at different times. The divinity of Christ and the Holy Spirit is to be explained in terms of three different ways or "modes" of divine self-revelation (hence the term "modalism"). This all too easily becomes an essentially Unitarian notion of God whom we call Father, Son, or Spirit only because this one God self-discloses in three different modes or manners.

Although various forms of "modalism" have emerged within the Christian tradition over time, they are generally based upon much the same understandings of the dynamics of the Trinity:

1. The one God is revealed in the manner of creator and lawgiver. This aspect of God is referred to as "the Father."
2. The same God is also revealed in the manner of savior, in the person of Jesus Christ. This aspect of God is referred to as "the Son."
3. The same God is also revealed in the manner of the one who sanctifies and gives eternal life. This aspect of God is referred to as "the Spirit."

There is thus no fundamental difference between the three persons of the Trinity, except for appearance and chronological location. Two main types of modalism should be noted: those which understand the difference between the three persons in a *chronological* way, and those which understand them in a *functional* way. It is important to appreciate this distinction, as it is frequently encountered in theological discussions. Chronological modalism holds that God was Father at one point in history; that God was then Son at another point; and finally, that God was Spirit. God thus appears in different modes at different times. The classic example of this form of modalism is Sabellianism, which we will discuss in more detail below. Functional modalism, on the other hand, holds that God operates in different ways at the present moment, and that the three persons refer to these different modes of action.

Perhaps the most important Trinitarian heresy is known as "Sabellianism". Its main features were set out by Epiphanius of Constantia in the late fourth century, as follows:

> Their doctrine is that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one and the same being, in the sense that three names are attached to one substance. It is just like the body, soul and spirit in a human being. The body is as it were the Father; the soul is the Son; while the Spirit is to the Godhead as his spirit is to a human being. Or it is like the sun, being one substance but having three manifestations: light, heat, and the orb itself. The heat [...] is analogous to the Spirit; the light to the Son; while the Father himself is represented by the essence of each substance. The Son was at one time emitted, like a ray of light; he accomplished in the world all that related to the dispensation of the gospel and the salvation of humanity, and was then taken back into heaven, as a ray is emitted by the sun and then withdrawn again into the sun. The Holy Spirit is still being sent forth into the world and into those individuals who are worthy to receive it.

It is clear from the analysis presented by Epiphanius that Sabellianism is a form of chronological modalism. Its basic feature is the belief that the one supreme God acts in different ways at different points in history. In contrast, functional modalism designates the general belief that the same God acts in three different manners at any given point in history. The three persons of the Trinity thus designate different aspects of the activity of the one God. In its simplest forms, functional modalism could be set out as follows.

1. God the Father is the creator;
2. God the Son is the redeemer;
3. God the Holy Spirit is the sanctifier.

Here, the three persons of the Trinity are held to designate three actions of the one supreme God. God acts as creator (and we call this "Father"); God acts as redeemer (and we call this "Son"); God acts as sanctifier (and we call this the "Holy Spirit." The persons of the Trinity thus refer to different divine functions. The approach to the doctrine of the Trinity set out by Karl Barth could be interpreted as a variant of this form of modalism, as it can be understood to mean that God operates in different ways in the present. Many Barth scholars, however, dispute this.

Visualizing the Trinity

As we have emphasized, the doctrine of the Trinity seems counterintuitive to many people. Partly, this difficulty arises from the problem of the *visualization* of the Trinity. How can we make sense of such a complex and abstract idea? How can we picture it in our minds? St. Patrick (ca. 391–ca. 461), the patron saint of Ireland, is rumored to have used the leaf of a shamrock to illustrate how a single leaf could have three different elements. Gregory of Nyssa uses a series of analogies in his letters to help his readers grasp the reality of the Trinity, including:

1. The analogy of a spring, fount and stream of water. The one flows from the other and they share the same substance – water. Although different aspects of the stream of water may be *distinguished*, they cannot be *separated*.

2. The analogy of a chain. There are many links in a chain; yet to be connected to one is to be connected to all of them. In the same way, Gregory argues, someone who encounters the Holy Spirit also encounters the Father and the Son.

3. The analogy of a rainbow. Drawing on the Nicene statement that Christ is "light from light," Gregory argues that the rainbow allows us to distinguish and appreciate the different colors of a sunbeam. There is only one beam of light, yet the colors blend seamlessly into one another.

In what follows, we shall explore one more recent way of thinking about the Trinity which has proved very helpful to many. It is associated with the contemporary American theologian Robert Jenson (born 1930), and is set out in his work *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (1982).

The Trinity and the naming of God

To understand Jenson's approach, we may ask a simple question: who is the God of Israel? One answer might be that God is God; as there is no other god, there is nothing further to discuss. But remember that ancient Israel existed in a polytheistic context. There were many

Trinity. In *The Triune Identity*, Jenson argues that "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" is the proper name for the God whom Christians know in and through Jesus Christ. It is imperative, he argues, that God should have a proper name. "Trinitarian discourse is Christianity's effort to identify the God who has claimed us. The doctrine of the Trinity comprises both a proper name, 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit' . . . and an elaborate development and analysis of corresponding identifying descriptions." Jenson points out that ancient Israel was set in a polytheistic context, in which the term "god" conveyed relatively little information. It was necessary to *name* the god in question. A similar situation was confronted by the writers of the New Testament, who were obliged to identify the god at the heart of their faith, and distinguish this god from the many other gods worshipped and acknowledged in the region, especially in Asia Minor.

The doctrine of the Trinity thus *identifies* and *names* the Christian God – but identifies and names this God in a manner consistent with the biblical witness. It is not a name which we have chosen; it is a name which has been chosen for us, and which we are authorized to use. In this way, Jenson defends the priority of God's self-revelation against human constructions of concepts of divinity. "The gospel identifies its God thus: God is the one who raised Israel's Jesus from the dead. The whole task of theology can be described as the unpacking of this sentence in various ways. One of these produces the church's trinitarian language and thought." The doctrine of the Trinity, Jenson affirms, allows the church to discover the distinctiveness of its creed, and avoid becoming absorbed by rival conceptions of God.

The doctrine of the Trinity thus centers on the recognition that God is named by scripture, and within the witness of the church. Within the Hebraic tradition, God is identified by historical events. Jenson notes how many Old Testament texts identify God with reference to divine acts in history – such as the liberation of Israel from its captivity in Egypt. The same pattern is evident in the New Testament: God is identified with reference to specific historical events, supremely the resurrection of Jesus Christ. God comes to be identified in relation to Jesus Christ. Who is God? Which god are we talking about? The God who raised Christ from the dead. As Jenson puts it, "the emergence of a semantic pattern in which the uses of

'God' and 'Jesus Christ' are mutually determining" is of fundamental importance within the New Testament.

> The gospel of the New Testament is the provision of a new identifying description for this same God [as that of Israel]. The coming-to-apply of this new description is the event, the witness to which is the whole point of the New Testament. God, in the gospel, is "whoever raised Jesus from the dead." Identification of God by the resurrection did not replace identification by the exodus; it is essential to the God who raised Jesus that he is the same one who freed Israel. But the new thing that is the content of the gospel is that God has now identified himself also as "him that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord" (Romans 4:24). In the New Testament such phrases become the standard way of referring to God.

Jenson thus recovers a personal conception of God from metaphysical speculation. "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" is a *proper name*, which we are asked to use in naming and addressing God. "Linguistic means of identification – proper names, identifying descriptions, or both – are a necessity of religion. Prayers, like other requests and praises, must be addressed." The Trinity is thus an instrument of theological precision, which forces us to be explicit about the God under discussion. Christians do not believe in a generic god, but in a very specific God who is known in and through a series of actions in history.

Communicating the Trinity: hymns

Our discussion thus far may well have created the impression that the doctrine of the Trinity is highly inaccessible, having little to do with the realities of Christian life. Yet, as we noted earlier in this book, many theologians realized the importance of congregational hymns as a means of communicating theology to ordinary believers. For Charles Wesley (1707–88), hymns were not merely a means of praising God; they were an instrument of theological education. So what should be more natural than to try to set out the basic themes of the doctrine of the Trinity in the form of a hymn?

In 1746, Wesley published a collection of 24 short hymns concerning the Trinity. Individually and collectively, they manage to

Figure 16 Charles Wesley preaching to the Indians in 1745, engraving. The Art Archive/Eileen Tweedy.

communicate and explain central Trinitarian ideas without technical language or theological fuss. This is one of the most effective of these hymns:

1. Father of Mankind be ever ador'd:
   Thy Mercy we find, In sending our Lord,
   To ransom and bless us; Thy Goodness we praise,
   For sending in Jesus, Salvation by Grace.

2. O Son of His Love, Who deignest to die,
   Our Curse to remove, Our Pardon to buy;
   Accept our Thanksgiving, Almighty to save,
   Who openest Heaven, To all that believe.

3. O Spirit of Love, Of Health, and of Power,
   Thy working we prove; Thy Grace we adore,
   Whose inward Revealing applies our Lord's Blood,
   Attesting and sealing us Children of God.

The hymn sets out the idea of the "economy of salvation" – the distinctively Christian understanding of the way in which salvation is effected in history. Wesley's concern is to identify its leading aspects, and show how the action of one and the same triune God can be seen in action throughout. Each person of the Trinity has its own distinctive role to play – a notion usually referred to as "appropriation." Every aspect of the great drama of redemption is shown to be interlocked. Father, Son, and Spirit are woven into this great tapestry of divine salvation in a continuous narrative. Although Wesley's theology needs a little elaboration at points, the fundamental purpose of the hymn is clear – to help congregations appreciate the manner in which the doctrine of the Trinity weaves together into a seamless garment the great threads of redemption.

The "social Trinity": Jürgen Moltmann

One of the most influential recent ways of understanding the doctrine of the Trinity and establish its relevance is a *social* understanding of the Trinity. Advocates of this approach hold that Christians should not imagine God on basis of a model of some individual person or thing which has three aspects, aspects, dimensions, or modes of being – for example, Patrick's image of the shamrock leaf, or Anselm of Canterbury's model of the River Nile as spring, river and lake (Anselm's knowledge of African geography is not very reliable!). Social approaches to the Trinity insist that God is instead to be thought of as a collective reality – a group, or a society, bound together by the mutual love, accord, and self-giving of its members. Cornelius Plantinga, for example, spoke of the Trinity as "a zestful, wondrous community of divine light, love, joy, mutuality and verve."

In *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (1980), Jürgen Moltmann attempts to liberate the Christian doctrine of God from the confines both of the ancient Greek metaphysics of substance and of the modern metaphysics of transcendental subjectivity. Moltmann's analysis is of particular importance on account of its social doctrine of the Trinity, which emphasizes the relative independence of the person and work of the Holy Spirit in its community with the Father and the Son. Developing this in a way that might cause anxiety to some, Moltmann

emphasizes that there is no fixed order in the Trinity. The unity of God is the unity of persons in relationship, as expressed in the Cappadocian doctrine of perichoresis. On this reading of this concept, Moltmann argues that "the trinitarian persons form their own unity by themselves in the circulation of the divine life."

Moltmann develops this point with reference to the notion of *perichoresis*. This Greek term (often translated as "mutual interpenetration") came into general use in the sixth century. It refers to the manner in which the three persons of the Trinity relate to one another. The concept of *perichoresis* allows the individuality of the persons to be maintained, while insisting that each person shares in the life of the other two. Moltmann's development of the idea proved particularly influential. The Trinity is to be conceived as "a community of being," in which each person, while maintaining its distinctive identity, penetrates the others and is penetrated by them. This notion has important implications for Christian political thought, as the liberation theologian Leonardo Boff and other theologians concerned with political theology have made subsequently clear. The mutual relationships among three coequal persons within the Godhead have been argued to provide a model both for human relationships within communities and for Christian political and social theorizing.

The doctrine of *perichoresis*, according to Moltmann, "links together in a brilliant way the threeness and the unity, without reducing the threeness to the unity, or dissolving the unity in the threeness." Moltmann understands this perichoresis as a process by which each person of the Trinity, by virtue of their eternal mutual love, lives *in* the other two as a fellowship through a "process of most perfect and intense empathy." This conception of God is radically opposed, Moltmann insists, to any "monotheistic" or "monarchical" doctrine of God which would reduce the real subjectivity of the three persons. Of particular interest is how Moltmann uses this notion to develop a fundamentally theological understanding of human society.

"The trinity is our social program." For Moltmann, the doctrine of the Trinity is to be understood to provide a vision of God as a union of three divine persons or distinct, but related subjects. This specific understanding of God as a mutually loving, interacting, and sustaining society allows Christian theology to develop a theory of society. Moltmann therefore sees the social view of the Trinity as having

both a theological and a social function: theologically, it offers a penetrating critique of a false idea of God; socially, it articulates a notion of God as a social being, capable of functioning as a proper paradigm for society as a whole.

> The triune God is reflected only in a united and uniting community of Christians without domination and subjection and a united and uniting humanity without class rule and without dictatorial oppression. That is the world in which people are defined by their social relationships and not by their power or their property. That is the world in which human beings have all things in common and share everything with one another except their personal qualities.

Engaging with a text

Karl Barth is widely regarded as one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century, and is widely credited with the rediscovery of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity in recent decades. Barth's ideas on the Trinity are important for an understanding of recent theological debates. Unfortunately, they are a little difficult to grasp for those who are new to theology, and this section will therefore offer much more explanation than normal.

Barth's reflections on the Trinity are anchored in his fundamental belief that divine self-revelation has actually taken place. What, Barth asks towards the beginning of his *Church Dogmatics*, must be true, if God is able to be known in this way? Read this text slowly, and try to appreciate the issues Barth is raising.

> The question of the self-revealing God which thus forces itself upon us as the first question cannot, if we follow the witness of Scripture, be separated in any way from the second question: How does it come about, how is it actual, that this God reveals Himself? Nor can it be separated from the third question: What is the result? What does this event do to the man to whom it happens? Conversely the second and third questions cannot possibly be separated from the first . . . *God* reveals Himself. He reveals Himself *through Himself*. He reveals *Himself*. If we really want to understand revelation in terms of its subject, i.e., God, then the first thing that we have to realize is that this subject,

> God, the revealer, is identical with His act in revelation, and also with its effect. It is from this fact, which in the first instance we are merely indicating, that we learn we must begin the doctrine of revelation with the doctrine of the triune God.

"*God* reveals Himself. He reveals Himself *through Himself.* He reveals *Himself.*" With these words (which are very difficult to translate into inclusive English) Barth sets up the revelational framework which leads to the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity. Barth often quotes the Latin phrase *Deus dixit!* – "God has spoken" – in his discussion of revelation. For Barth, God *has* spoken, and it is the task of theology to inquire concerning what this revelation presupposes and implies. For Barth, theology is a process of "thinking afterwards" about what is contained in God's self-revelation. We have to "inquire carefully into the relation between our knowing of God, and God himself in his being and nature."

With such statements, Barth sets up the context of the doctrine of the Trinity: given that God's self-revelation has taken place, what must be true of God if this can have happened? What does the actuality of revelation have to tell us about the being of God? Barth's starting point for his discussion of the Trinity is not a doctrine or an idea, but the actuality of God's speaking and God's being heard. For how can God be heard, when sinful humanity is incapable of hearing the Word of God?

The above is simply a paraphrase of sections of the first half-volume of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, entitled "The Doctrine of the Word of God," punctuated by occasional quotations. There is an enormous amount being said in this, and it requires unpacking. Two themes need to be carefully noted.

1. Sinful humanity is fundamentally incapable of hearing the Word of God.
2. Nevertheless, sinful humanity has heard the Word of God, in that this Word makes its sinfulness known to it.

The very fact that revelation takes place thus requires explanation. For Barth, this implies that humanity is passive in the process of reception; the process of revelation is, from its beginning to its end, subject to the

sovereignty of God as Lord. For revelation to *be* revelation, God must be capable of effecting self-revelation to sinful humanity, despite their sinfulness.

Once this paradox has been appreciated, the general structure of Barth's doctrine of the Trinity can be followed. In revelation, Barth argues, God must be as shown in the divine self-revelation. There must be a direct correspondence between the revealer and the revelation. If "God reveals himself as Lord" (a characteristically Barthian assertion), then God must be Lord "antecedently in himself." Revelation is the reiteration in time of what God actually is in eternity. There is thus a direct correspondence between:

1. the revealing God;
2. the self-revelation of God.

To put this in the language of Trinitarian theology, the Father is revealed in the Son.

So what about the Spirit? Here we come to what is perhaps the most difficult aspect of Barth's doctrine of the Trinity: the idea of "revealedness" (*Offenbarsein*). To explore this, we will have to use an illustration not used by Barth himself. Imagine two individuals walking outside Jerusalem on a spring day around the year AD 30. They see three men being crucified, and pause to watch. The first points to the central figure, and says, "There is a common criminal being executed." The second, pointing to the same man, replies, "There is the Son of God dying for me." To say that Jesus is the self-revelation of God will not do in itself; there must be some means by which Jesus is *recognized* as the self-revelation of God. It is this recognition of revelation *as* revelation that constitutes the idea of *Offenbarsein*.

How is this insight achieved? Barth is quite clear: sinful humanity is not capable of reaching this insight unaided. Barth is not prepared to allow humanity any positive role in the interpretation of revelation, believing that this is to subject divine revelation to human theories of knowledge. The recognition of revelation *as* revelation must itself be the work of God – more accurately, the work of the Spirit. Humanity does not become capable of hearing the word of the Lord (*capax verbi domini*), and then act in response to having heard

that word; both the hearing and capacity to hear are given in the one act by the Spirit.

Barth's achievement was to demonstrate that the concepts of revelation and the Trinity were so completely interlocked and interwoven that neither could be affirmed without the other. To believe in a revealing God is implicitly to believe in a Trinitarian conception of God, which it is the task of theology to unfold and explore. For Barth, the doctrine of the Trinity is thus presupposed by the entire project of Christian theology. While many would express reservations at aspects of his approach, few would deny that Barth's achievement represents a massive theological landmark.

You may find the following questions helpful in interacting with this text, either on your own or in a group discussion.

1. Try to set out in your own words the argument that links the actuality of revelation with the doctrine of the Trinity.
2. Try to answer this hypothetical question. Has revelation taken place, if we do not recognize it as revelation? You might like to use the example given above (the scene at Calvary) to answer this question.
3. On the basis of the extracted passage from the *Church Dogmatics* reproduced above, set out how Barth understands Father, Son, and Spirit to be involved in the process of divine revelation. You might like to reproduce Barth's own discussion, and then restate this in your own words.